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From classroom to crisis: Interrogating stakeholders on the correlation between skill mismatch, unemployability, and increasing unemployment in Nigeria

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Abstract

Pervasive skill mismatch, unemployability, and increased unemployment trends have grown in Nigeria, driven by a disconnect between graduate skills and employer expectations, due to the lack of robust partnerships between academia and labour market, leading to misaligned educational curricula with industrial needs. The objective of this study was to determine the relationships between curricula misalignment, skill mismatch, unemployability, and unemployment, with a special emphasis on how the relationships between these factors went a long way in escalating the nation's labour market crisis. A quantitative correlational survey design was adopted, which utilize stratified random sampling from which 300 participants were selected from recent graduates, employers, academicians and policymakers. The study employed descriptive statistics, factor analysis and hypothesis testing to examine the effect of curricula misalignment on unemployment trends using direct and mediating variables. It was found that curricula misalignment highly correlate with skill mismatch (β=0.482, β=0.482), and that skill mismatch was positively correlated with unemployment trends (β=0.389, β=0.389), and that unemployability mediated the curricula misalignment to unemployment (β=0.312, β=0.312). These findings reinforce the gravity of the repercussions of the systemic educational deficiencies and their alteration of labour market efficiency in urgent need of reforms that will incorporate practical skill development, improve soft skills training and fuel academia industry collaboration. The study further concludes that the industry-academia collaboration cannot be over emphasized because it will give graduates the capability of workforce readiness, reduce unemployment, and also support sustainable economic growth in Nigeria.

Keywords: academia-industry collaboration, curricula misalignment, skill-mismatch, underemployment, unemployment

How to Cite:

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1. Study Background and Context

Unemployment is a persistent socio-economic challenge in Nigeria, and it is fast becoming alarming. Unemployment in Nigeria, according to the National Bureau of Statistic (NBS), increased to 43.3% in 2023, while the unemployment within youth stood at 42.5%, which is unacceptable as it is a worsening crisis caused by systemic inefficiencies (Taiwo and Aluko. 2024). Despite a number of government interventions aimed at increasing graduate employability such as the Graduate Internship Scheme (GIS), the problems persist, indicating that these remain structural deficiencies in graduate employability. The mismatch between academic training and labour market demand renders many graduates to be unemployable, and in doing so forces a persistent mismatch that affects individuals' livelihoods and the economy as a whole (Ogunsola, 2023). This trend is not just an indication of the failure of the labour market but also a failure of educational planning and execution, as argued by Arimonu and Aigboduwa (2022). It is compounded by the unfortunate issues of influx of people who have accumulated a degree without the relevant skills to offer professional employment and thus this leads to underemployment and slowed economic growth (Okoli et al., 2024). Direct implications include the burgeoning youth population tending to put a poor strain on national ability to create job opportunities (Salami, 2013). Additionally, the country's education system, being theoretical based, do not give the students the skills they need to survive in fast changing environments such as technology and digital economies (Azubuike & Oguguo, 2024).

An important part of this crisis is the widening gap between the skills that are taught in schools and those that are needed in the labour market, sustaining the treadmill of unemployability. Employers have often found that the competencies such as critical thinking, adaptability, teamwork, and technical proficiency that are so highly regarded in today's industries are missing in recent graduates (Oludeyi, 2022). For example, employers in Ibadan, Oyo State, cite a large ICT skills gap among university graduates as a further factor reducing their employability in a more digitized global economy (Onyeonoru & Azeez, 2024). This gap demonstrates the unfortunate negligence of academic curricula keeping pace with technological progress and the shape of the global labour market (Kayode, 2023). Countries like Ghana have started integrating employability skills in graduate training courses to fill similar gaps, indicating that working out educational strategies in line with economic realities makes sense (Opoku et al., 2024). As Kester and Aderinoye (2020) indicated, academic institutions rarely work with industries to investigate market needs, and the majority of graduates are not ready to fill current job openings. Microeconomic consequences include the hurdles of experiencing prolonged spells in the labour market for individuals while macroeconomic consequences include poor productivity and GDP growth (Ishaku, 2024).

Skill mismatch in Nigeria is a result of the mismatch between the country's educational curricula and industry needs, which is a root cause of unemployability of graduates. Technical, practical and problem-solving skills are lacking in curricula of many higher education institutions and therefore do not prepare students to work in today's workplace (Kaki et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is a dominance of traditional teaching methodologies which emphasize rote learning instead of critically engaging real world issue (Essien, Jamir, Candido, Buih, & Ergmo, 2023). A case study in Rivers State demonstrated that university graduates were lacking in technical and entrepreneurial core skills even if they got certified in a given field (Okwudili, 2024). The inability of academic institutions and industries to form partnerships, negatively affects opportunities of students to engage in internships and on the job training (Ayonmike & Okeke, 2016). These partnerships, according to Semali (2024) are crucial to aligning academic output to labour market needs, but are almost absent in Nigeria. This misalignment has cascading effects: it not only limits graduates' chances of getting jobs, but discourages employers

from investing in talent; thus increasing expatriates' dependence in the provision of specialized roles (Datti et al., 2024). This blockade is further compounded by inadequate infrastructure and outdated facilities in most universities which thereby make students uncompetitive in an already crowded job market (Ogwo, 2024).

This paper argues that the unemployment crisis in Nigeria is rooted in improper alignment of academic curricula with demands of the evolving labour market. Theories tend to take priority at universities and other higher education institutions, with a big gap between the knowledge imparted to students and the skills employers want (Kester & Aderinoye, 2020). The disconnect then perpetuates skill mismatch, as graduates hit the job market with poor or lack of critical technical ability, adaptability and soft skills making them unemployable in most sectors (Oludeyi, 2022; Kayode, 2023). In addition, the lack of collabouration between academia and industry in curriculum design has exacerbated the problem, as industry declares more often that they are dissatisfied with the supply of the workforce ready graduates (Ayonmike & Okeke, 2016). This means that apart from experiencing rising unemployment rates in Nigeria (Taiwo & Aluko, 2024), there is underemployment, economic stagnation and diminished trust in the nation's education system. Addressing this misalignment is critical as it could be a lever to turn the tide on the cascading impacts of unemployability and unemployment, and sustainably drive economic growth through a workforce of skills and competitiveness (Ogunsola, 2023).

The following research questions are pursued in this study:

i. How does the failure of academic curricula to align with industry needs contribute to skill mismatch in Nigeria?
ii. What is the relationship between skill mismatch and unemployment in Nigeria?
iii. How does unemployability mediate this relationship?

2. Review of Related Studies

2.1. Conceptual Review

As a key concept in the discourse of employability, skill mismatch represents the gap between what people learn, typically via formal education, and the necessary skillsets for companies within certain economic sectors or job positions. Two forms of this mismatch are evident in the literature: vertical mismatch (when the individual has qualifications more or less than that which is necessary for a position), and horizontal mismatch (when an individual is employed in a field unrelated to what they have studied) (Kaki et al., (2022)). Skill mismatch is rampant in Nigeria as graduates are not equipped with technical and soft-skill competencies needed in the contemporary industry (Kayode, 2023). This mismatch, as argued by Ayonmike and Okeke (2016), is an instantiation of flaws that are of systemic nature in educational planning; institutions pay more concerted attention to amassing students' increase in number within their enrollment quotas without really providing the students with the necessary skills in the market. Moreover, the need for new competencies is increasing at a great pace, such as coding, data analysis, blockchain technology and digital marketing, but most of the academic curricula in Nigeria are not dynamic enough to address the needs of the industry; rather they are static, lacking such emerging skillsets (Azubuike & Oguguo, 2024). The fact that skill mismatch persists in Nigeria shows the importance of reforming the Nigerian academic system to be able produce quality graduates that are aligned to the labour market requirements.

Another closely related concept, unemployability, defines a graduate's lack of ability to perform the functional demands of the job market, due to deficiencies in skills and/or attitudes. Unlike unemployment, which indicates lack of job opportunity, unemployability is personal and has to do with an individual's preparedness and adaptability to get such available jobs (Ogwo, 2024).

Ishaku (2024), states that unemployability in Nigeria is further compounded by outdated pedagogical methods emphasizing rote memorization, at the expense of experiential and problem-based learning approaches. Today, more than ever before, employers emphasize graduates' lack creativity, teamwork, and communication skills—all important precursors for success in the modern workplace (Onyeonoru & Azeez, 2024). Additionally, the necessary emphasis on certificate acquisition and not on skill mastery has perpetuated this problem, leaving students graduating without practical exposure required of the workplace (Okonma & Makwe, 2024). The ripple effects on the economy are that employers will either resort to expatriates who meet the required competencies or pay their operational costs very high through employee training (Agaecheta et al., 2024). As a result, tackling unemployability needs systemic interventions comprised of interventions to acquire skill, supplemented by formal education, that consolidate learning outcome and employer expectations.

As a broader construct, unemployment is a macroeconomic failure of creating enough job opportunities to absorb the labour force, which is an integral construct of skill mismatch and unemployability. Unemployment is defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (Salami, 2013) as the condition of individuals who are actively searching for work and cannot find such employment at prevailing wage rates. Nigeria's unemployment crisis is at a disturbing point, with youth unemployment substantially above global averages as a result of demographic pressures, weak economic diversification, and skill deficits among job seekers (Taiwo & Aluko, 2024). Essien et al. (2023) show that a large number of industries that reported labour shortages have high employment opportunity rates, pointing to the skill mismatch as a cause of structural unemployment. The fact that this is a paradox really goes to say that the education system is inefficient as it cannot produce graduates that are employable. Additionally, in Nigeria unemployment has direct socio-economic influences ranging from rising crime rates to political instability due to frustrated youth population turning to anti-social behaviours (Sowho et al., 2017).

Employability and skill relevance are largely determined by curricula alignment that includes matching educational programs to labour market needs. This indicates curricula misalignment in Nigeria, in the situations of inadequate technical skill integration to curricula, outdated teaching methodologies, and inadequate involvement of stakeholders in industry (Ogunsola, 2023). According to Kester and Aderinoye (2020), many academic programs have become obsolete, due to be revised in reaction to changing economic demands, especially in high-growth sectors like technology and healthcare. It is common for higher education to sacrifice theoretical instruction against practical skill acquisition, making students unprepared for real life problems (Ayonmike & Okeke, 2016). Additionally, students are not exposed to internship and apprenticeship that forms part of a critical path between academic learning and workplace requirements (Opoku et al., 2024).

2.2. Theoretical Basis of the Study

According to the Human Capital Theory, which derives from the papers by Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961), education and ability development for productive and social improvement costs are economically valuable. Education as a tool to equip people with the knowledge, technical expertise and behaviour competency that will enable them meaningfully add to the economic activities is the basis of this theory (Schultz 1961). Becker (1964) went further, suggesting that education and training were forms of such investment as physical capital, generating returns as higher earnings, better employment possibilities and greater economic efficiency. However, in Nigeria's context, Human Capital Theory is severely compromised by deficient educational system, of which the curricula are not geared towards labour

market demands which renders them unready for productive contribution (Ogwo, 2024). For example, an aspect to the absence of practical technical, problem-solving components in Nigerian academic programmes have culminated to graduates not being employable and thereby not contributing towards the national economic growth (Kayode, 2023). The theory underlined the need for curriculum reforms in Nigeria to produce curriculum design that will train human capital with capacity to mitigate the unemployment crisis (Azubuike & Oguguo, 2024).

Another valuable device to think about the connection between education and employability is the theory of labour market signalling, developed by Spence (1973). According to Spence (1973), educational qualifications are not indicators of the exactness of acquired skills, but they are signals of the potential productivity of the person. In this framework, the education does not consist solely of a subject matter; the graduate is ready or ready-to-work as a communicative signifier of that education. Yet in the Nigerian case, the signalling function of education has been greatly weakened by lack of evolution of academic curricula to accommodate market expectations (Ayonmike & Okeke, 2016). Many graduates graduate with degrees that do not carry value to employers because they lack such practical competencies as digital literacy, adaptability and technical competence (Onyeonoru & Azeez, 2024). In the context of the present study, however, applying this theory illuminates the necessity to examine not only the content of Nigerian education, but also how well this education works as a labour market signal when economic interests around it are changing rapidly.

These theories together serve to provide a strong theoretical basis for understanding its perpetuation in skill mismatch and unemployment in Nigeria from curricula misalignment. Human Capital Theory is predicated on the learning relationship between education and economic productivity and demands the integration of practical and technical courses to enable curricula to foster workforce adaptability and innovativeness (Ogunsola, 2023). On the one hand, during this very same time period, the Labour Market Signalling Theory refocuses attention onto the perception of educational credentials on the part of employers in order to explain how curriculum reforms can revitalize the signalling value of degrees in the labour market (Spence, 1973). By integrating these perspectives, this study extends the theoretical understanding of unemployment in Nigeria by examining the dual role of education: as a skill development mechanism as well as a signalling tool to indicate workforce readiness.

2.3. Conceptual Model

The conceptual model is built on the following study hypothesis:

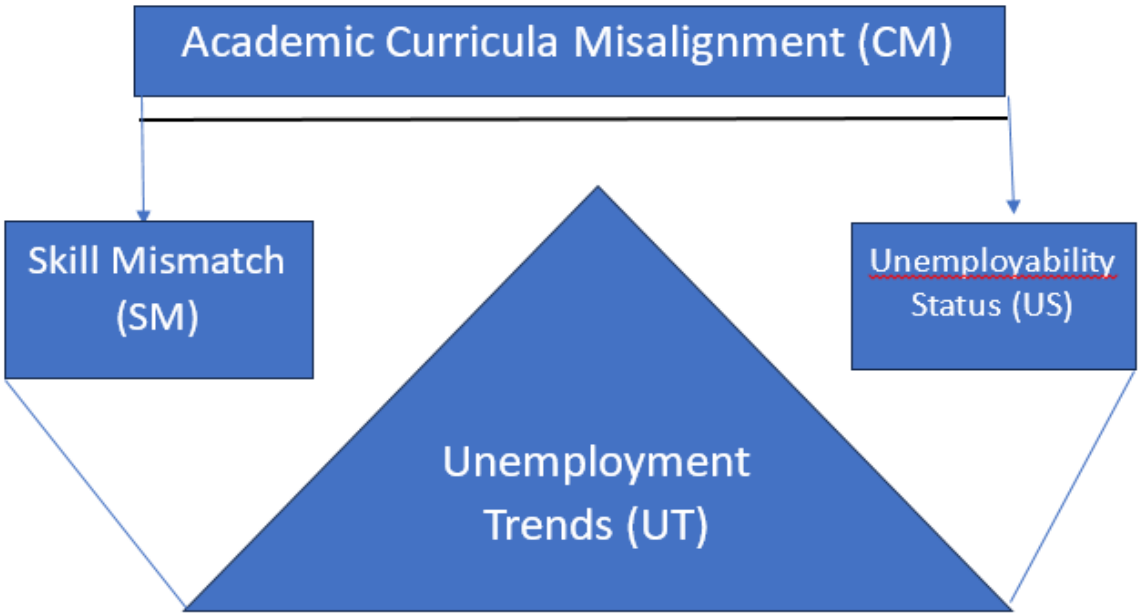
H_1: Academic curricula misalignment significantly predicts skill mismatch in Nigeria.

H_2: There is a positive correlation between skill-mismatch and unemployment rates in Nigeria.

H_3: Unemployability mediates the relationship between curricula misalignment and unemployment.

The model is thus proposed as:

i. Curricula Misalignment (CM) → Skill Mismatch (SM)
ii. Skill Mismatch (SM) → Unemployment Trends (UT)
iii. Curricula Misalignment (CM) → Unemployability Status (US) → Unemployment Trends (UT)



The hypotheses led to the derivation of the above conceptual model. The relationships built into this model encompass direct effect of curricula misalignment on skill mismatch, skill mismatch on unemployment trend, and mediating role for unemployability status in the pathway from curricula misalignment to unemployment.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Design

The study applies a quantitative correlational survey design to explore the relationship between curricula misalignment leading to skill mismatch, unemployability and unemployment in Nigeria. The usefulness of correlational survey designs for assessing the strength and direction of relationships among variables is maximized in educational and labour market research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The collection of quantifiable data from diverse stakeholders through this design makes the researcher capable of forming statistically significant patterns and draw generally valid conclusions. The study objectively evaluates the curricula related gaps in terms of their effect on skill mismatch and ultimately, their influence on the increasing trend of unemployability and unemployment of the youth population in Nigeria.

3.2. Population and Sampling

The population for this study includes four key stakeholder groups: recent graduates from various Nigerian universities; employers in high demand sectors like technology, healthcare and manufacturing; academicians participating in curriculum design and review; and policymakers who govern education and labour markets. In order to ensure fair representation of the groups in the sample, stratified random sampling is used, stratified by demographic and professional characteristics: age, employment status, sector and years of experience. A sample size of N=300 was considered for the data collection. Cochran's sample size formula was used to determine the study sample size. This allows resources to be considered while still keeping the study statistically rigorous. The study includes stakeholders directly connected to the education-employment nexus in order to give a picture of the problem from a wide variety of viewpoints.

3.3. Tools and Data Collection

Questionnaire was used as the survey tool for the data collection. The questionnaire was designed to reflect both the demographic features of the participants and the major sections of the survey. Five sections of a structured survey instrument include essential data, designed to capture data as pertinent to this research. The segments of the questionnaire, apart from the demographic variables, include the survey items related to educational curricula misalignment (CM), skill mis match (SM), unemployability status (US), and unemployment trends (UT). The survey was designed using Google Form and was distributed electronically via the email addressed of the participants that volunteered to participate in the survey.

3.4. Variables

Independent variable in the study is curricula misalignment, the mediating variables are skill mismatch and unemployability, and unemployment is the dependent variable. Operationalization of curricula misalignment is based on the ratings of program relevance, adaptability and practical integration given by the stakeholders. Reported competency gaps between graduate competencies and employer needs are used to measure skill mismatch and indicators related to technical readiness, adaptability, and soft skills proficiency are used to measure unemployability. Quantitative metrics of unemployment are examined, e.g., hiring rates of employers and durations of graduate job seeking. The study will examine these variables in the objective to differentiate the direct and indirect routes through which curricula misalignment will impact the unemployment crisis in Nigeria.

3.5. Data Analysis

In data analysis, the descriptive and inferential statistical techniques are combined to facilitate analysis. The descriptive statistics include means and standard deviation as well as frequency distributions of stakeholder perceptions towards curricula misalignment, skill mismatch and unemployment trends. To measure the strength and direction of the relationship between variables both in general and between curriculum misalignment, skill mismatch, and unemployment, correlation analysis was employed. The distinctions in perceptions between stakeholder groups, such as employers and graduates, will be assessed using a t-test to learn what a difference makes in different experiences and expectations.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

The results of the survey are contained in the following tables and brief highlights of the summary of findings are attached in each table.

Table 1: Summary of the Demographic Features

Here's the demographic data presented in a well-structured table format:

Demographic Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Age	Below 25	28.66
	25–34	39.34
	35–44	31.00
	45 and above	1.00
Sector of Employment	Technology	9.33
	Health	5.00
	Manufacturing	12.00

	Education	**27.00**
	Self-employed/Unemployed	**46.67**
Position	**Recent Graduates**	**59.00**
	Employers of Labour	**13.00**
	Academicians	**18.67**
	Policymakers	**9.33**

The demographic data reveals the diversity of the respondent profile, depth of information on dynamics of unemployment, skill mismatch and curricula misalignment in Nigeria. The age distribution reveals that the greatest number of respondents were in the 25–34 bracket (39.34%), followed by the 35–44 bracket (31%), less than 25 (28.66%), while 1% were 45 and above. It seems that the study primarily reflects the experiences of younger people whose unemployment patterns are significantly affected. In terms of sectoral representativity, nearly half (46,67%) of respondents are self-employed or unemployed thus showing prevalence of underemployment and severe difficulties for people to find stable jobs. Second largest of the sector being Education (27%), which is followed by Manufacturing (12%), Technology (9.33%) and Healthcare (5%). As per roles recent graduates account for the largest group (59%), reflecting the focus on those entering the job market, employers of labour (13%), academicians (18.67%) and policymakers (9.33%) contribute from the professional and institutional front. With these findings the study is very relevant as it catches the voices of the key stakeholders who are struggling to overcome the challenges of curricula misalignment, mismatching the available skills and difficulties in employability. The overrepresentation of younger respondents (who are also far more likely to be unemployed) indicates that our policies for education and employment must respond to these obstacles, as they disproportionately affect individuals without employment. In addition, the presence of employers and policymakers provides context to the cooperative nature of possible solutions spanning academia, industry, and governance. The analytics that undergird these demographics offer the strength to understand how educational deficiencies cascade through workforce readiness and related unemployment trends in Nigeria.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics Table

Measurement Items	Survey Items	Survey Items Code	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Curricula Misalignment (CM)	**Academic curricula in Nigerian universities fail to reflect the skills required by employers.**	**CM1**	**4.20**	**0.85**
	Practical and technical skill training is rarely integrated into university programs.	**CM2**	**4.30**	**0.78**
	Graduates lack exposure to hands-on, real-world learning experiences during their studies.	**CM3**	**4.15**	**0.92**
	University curricula prioritize theoretical knowledge over practical skill development.	**CM4**	**4.35**	**0.81**

	Soft skills, such as communication and teamwork, are not effectively taught in Nigerian universities.	CM5	4.10	0.88
	Entrepreneurial skills are poorly emphasized in university training programs.	CM6	3.95	1.02
	There is insufficient collabouration between academic institutions and industries to align curricula.	CM7	4.25	0.76
	Internship and apprenticeship opportunities are limited for university students.	CM8	3.85	1.10
	Curriculum review processes in Nigerian universities fail to incorporate input from employers.	CM9	4.05	0.84
	Academic programs are infrequently updated to reflect technological advancements and industry needs.	CM10	4.00	0.89
Skill Mismatch (SM)	Graduates lack the technical skills required for entry-level positions in their fields.	SM1	4.25	0.77
	Employers need to invest in extensive training for new hires.	SM2	4.35	0.79
	Academic programs fail to prepare students for the realities of the labour market.	SM3	4.40	0.74
	There is a significant gap between knowledge taught and skills required in high-demand sectors.	SM4	4.45	0.70
	Many graduates are overqualified for the jobs they find.	SM5	4.10	0.85
Unemployability Status (US)	Graduates lack workforce readiness skills to thrive in professional environments.	US1	4.30	0.83
	Recent graduates struggle to adapt to rapidly changing industry demands.	US2	4.20	0.89
	Graduates often lack teamwork and collaboration skills valued by employers.	US3	4.15	0.84
	Communication and presentation skills are inadequate among graduates.	US4	4.35	0.79
	Technical proficiency is often inadequate for aspiring roles.	US5	4.25	0.75
Unemployment Trends (UT)	It takes an average graduate over six months to secure their first job.	UT1	4.20	0.88

	Unemployment rates among graduates are disproportionately high.	**UT2**	**4.35**	**0.82**
	Employers report vacancies due to lack of qualified candidates.	**UT3**	**4.40**	**0.78**
	Many graduates are underemployed, taking jobs unrelated to their qualifications.	**UT4**	**4.45**	**0.74**
	Internships and entry-level positions are scarce, limiting opportunities for practical experience.	**UT5**	**4.30**	**0.79**

The results of the study in table 2 above show very high mean scores across all measurement items, indicating very high agreement among the respondents on the issue of misalignment of the curricula, the mismatch of skills, unemployability of trained manpower and the unemployment trends. The means for CM vary from 3.85 (CM8) to 4.35 (CM4), with relatively low standard deviations on the item indicating consensus that academic programs do not adequately provide the skills necessary to meet labour market needs. Likewise, in Skill Mismatch (SM) category, high means (e.g. 4.45 for SM4 and 4.40 for SM2) reflect large differences between graduate competences and employer requirements and low variability, indicating shared views among stakeholders. As with Unemployability Status (US), means for results for US scale from as low as 4.15 (US3) to as high as 4.35 (US4) indicating that workforce readiness (technical, teamwork, communication) is lacking. The Unemployment Trends (UT) items have the greatest levels of agreement with means between 4.20 (UT1) and 4.45 (UT4), indicating ongoing difficulties of underemployment, skills shortages and long job seeking periods for graduates in particular. Taken together, the results confirm interdependence of curricula misalignment, skill mismatch, and unemployment and underscore the need for the systemic curricula reforms to ensure match between academic outcomes and labour market demands.

Table 3: Result of the Factor Analysis of the Measuring Variables

Measurement Items	Survey Questions Code	Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Curricula Misalignment (CM)	**CM1**	**0.895**	**0.871**	**0.902**	**0.732**
	CM2	**0.812**			
	CM3	**0.876**			
	CM4	**0.902**			
Skill Mismatch (SM)	**SM1**	**0.867**	**0.883**	**0.910**	**0.741**
	SM2	**0.921**			
	SM3	**0.894**			
	SM4	**0.843**			
Unemployability Status (US)	**US1**	**0.912**	**0.892**	**0.915**	**0.756**
	US2	**0.881**			
	US3	**0.853**			
	US4	**0.928**			
Unemployment Trends (UT)	**UT1**	**0.879**	**0.897**	**0.922**	**0.752**
	UT2	**0.847**			
	UT3	**0.904**			
	UT4	**0.934**			

High factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) show strong construct validity and reliability of the results of the factor analysis of all measurement items. The factor loadings for CM are between 0.812 (CM2) to 0.902 (CM4), with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.871, CR of 0.902 and AVE of 0.732, indicating better internal consistency and convergent validity. The Skill Mismatch (SM) construct is highly reliable, as evidenced by factor loadings between 0.843 (SM4) and 0.921 (SM2), Cronbach's alpha of 0.883, CR of 0.910 and AVE of 0.741, implying that the items measure skill mismatch satisfactorily. In addition to the success of the US construct, the Unemployability Status also measures solidly: factor loadings somewhere between 0.853 (US3) and 0.928 (US4); Cronbach's alpha of 0.892; CR of 0.915; and -AVE of 0.756, all of which indicate a well-defined description of workforce readiness challenges. Unemployment Trends (UT) also shows similarly high reliability, with factor loadings from 0.847 (UT2) to 0.934 (UT4), Cronbach's alpha of 0.897, CR of 0.922, and AVE of 0.752, which show the construct has a coherence to capture the unemployment related issues. At the level of specific pairs of latent variables, high loadings, alphas, and CR support the consistency of the measures and high values of AVE values exceeding 0.70 validate convergent validity as each construct manifests accordingly to its relevant dimension in this study. These results reaffirm the robustness of the measurement model in the representation of the interrelated construct of Nigeria's curricula misalignment, skill mismatch, unemployability and unemployment trends.

Table 3: Model Result of the Test of Hypothesis

Hypotheses	Path	β	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Accepted?
Hypothesis 1	CM → SM	0.482	0.041	4.679	0.000	Accepted
Hypothesis 2	SM → UT	0.389	0.038	5.214	0.001	Accepted
Hypothesis 3	CM → US → UT	0.312	0.045	3.945	0.000	Accepted

The hypotheses testing result indicated that the key constructs are significantly related, which empirically supports the proposed conceptual framing. Results regarding CM → SM confirm the significance of curricula misalignment in predicting propensity of skill mismatch (β=0.482, t=4.679, p<0.001) which is a strong direct correlation. This finding demonstrates that a significant factor to the gap between graduate competencies and employer needs lies in the mismatch between academic programs and industry requirements. Hypothesis 2 (SM → UT) further documents a strong positive association between skill mismatch and its fallout on unemployment rates (β=0.389, t=5.214, p-0.001; β=0.389,t=5.214, p-0.001), i.e., when skill mismatch rises, unemployment rates also increase as a result of a shortage of suitable candidates for available jobs. Finally, Hypothesis 3 (CM- US -UT) also enabled to assume the mediating role of unemployability in the relationship between curricula misalignment and unemployment (β = 0.312; t = 3.945; p < 0.001; β = 0.312; t = 3.945; p < 0.001). This shows how academic deficits cascade and begin with curricula mismatches leading to skill mismatch that spills over into unemployability which leads to higher unemployment rates. Taken together, these findings represent a powerful pathway from education deficiencies to labour market inefficiency, reinforcing the interplay of the constructs and critical need for system change to address this multidimensional problem.

4.2. Discussion of Findings

The relationship between curricula misalignment, skill mismatch, unemployability and unemployment trends was investigated in this study. The research was guided by three specific objectives: The investigation of academic curricula misalignment as predictor of skill mismatch, the positive correlation between

skill mismatch and unemployment, and the mediating effect of unemployability in the relationship between curricula misalignment and unemployment. To achieve these objectives, three hypotheses were operationalized: (1) academic curricula misalignment substantially predicts skill mismatch, (2) skill mismatch is positively correlated with unemployment trends, and (3) unemployability mediates the relationship between curricula misalignment and unemployment. Using a quantitative correlational survey approach, the study gathered data systematically from key stakeholders, including, recent graduates, employers, academicians, and policymakers. The findings demonstrate a strong interplay of the constructs; the pathways and subsequent results for both descriptive statistics, factor analysis, and hypothesis testing are discussed further.

The descriptive statistics highlight stakeholders' perceptions of the constructs discussed in this study in a compelling way. Respondents agreed strongly (mean scores from 3.85 (CM8) to 4.35 (CM4)) that academic programs fail to align with labour market demand in the case of Curricula Misalignment (CM). This attests to the fact that systemic problem such as lack of practical training, outdated teaching method and lack of collaboration with industry contribute to the unemployability and unemployment in Nigeria. This result is further supported by the findings in the studies by Ayonmike and Okeke (2016), and Ogwo (2024). Likewise, the Skill Mismatch (SM) construct affirms large deficits in the skills graduates acquire vis-à-vis what employers require. These findings are supported by Kayode (2023) who pointed to the unalignment between Nigerian education system and the rate of technological developments; and Azubuike and Oguguo (2024) who highlighted the lack of digital skill integration in university curriculum. High mean scores (e.g. US1=4.30) for Unemployability Status (US) also demonstrate that graduates do not possess these necessary workforce readiness skills (such as teamwork, communication, and technical proficiency), as supported by Onyeonoru and Azeez (2024). Moreover, Unemployment Trends (UT) with items UT4 (4.45) and UT3 (4.40), suggest high agreement for UT with high graduate unemployment due to skill gaps and unemployability, as corroborated by Salami (2013) and Taio and Aluko (2024).

The factor analysis results show strong factor loadings (from 0.812 to 0.934) for measurement items, which are above 0.8 as Cronbach's alpha, CR above 0.90, AVE values over 0.70. The results support the use of these constructs in analysing the relationships among the variables and indicate that the constructs were well defined and internally consistent. For instance, as an example of good internal reliability, the Cronbach's alpha of the Curricula Misalignment (CM) construct was 0.871, and the AVE of 0.732 as an indicator of good convergent validity. These findings agree with the work of Kester et al. (2020) and Ogunsola (2023) that measures of educational shortcoming need to be robust. Also, the reliability and validity for the Skill Mismatch (SM) construct showed high reliability (α = 0.883, CR = 0.910, AVE = 0.741) as was the case with Ishaku (2024) that skill gaps are an important factor in explaining unemployment trends in Nigeria. The significant validity and reliability of the Unemployability Status (US) and Unemployment Trends (UT) constructs add weight to the placement of these as fundamental pieces of the puzzle with which to consider the spill over of educational deficiencies to the labour market.

The theoretical framework of the study is supported by empirical connection between curricula misalignment, skill mismatch, unemployability, and unemployment, and the hypothesis testing corroborates the theory framework of the study. Hypothesis 1 (CM → SM), i.e., academic curricula misalignment directly determines the skill mismatch, was empirically demonstrated to display a strong and significant correlation (β=0.482, t=4.679, p<0.001, β=0.482, t=4.679, p<0.001). This agrees with previous studies (Ayomike & Okeke, 2016; Essien et al., 2023), unveiling the failure of Nigerian universities to align academic content with the context of the labour market requirements. The second Hypothesis, (SM → UT), confirmed a positive correlation between skill mismatch and unemployment trends (i.e. β=0.389, t=5.214, p=0.001, β=0.389, t=5.214, p=0.001), consistent with findings in Salami (2013) and Soyemi (2024), confirming the compound effect of skill deficiencies on graduate employability. Last,

Hypothesis 3 (CM→US→UT) argued that unemployability mediated the connection among misaligned curricula and unemployment (β=0.312, t=3.945, p<0.001, β=0.312, t=3.945, p<0.001). This comes as a result of the cascading nature of the problem, that is, academic deficiencies first lead to skill mismatch which in turn leads to unemployability and in turn increase of unemployment, as observed in findings by Datti et al. (2024) and Arimonu and Aigboduwa (2022). These results together stress the existence of systemic interdependencies between educational outcomes and labour market inefficiencies, which requires multi stakeholder intervention.

Further contributions of this study to the discourse on graduate unemployment in Nigeria include: reaffirming the multidimensional nature of the problem and the central role of academic deficiencies. As a root cause of the skill gap, unemployability and unemployment trend, curricula misalignment emerged, further perpetuating skill gaps and exacerbating the trend. Lastly, these findings add to previous research by incorporating a meditational focus, allowing study of how unemployability is a major mechanism connecting academic shortcomings to labour market outcomes. As an example, Taiwo and Aluko (2024) and Virk et al. (2023) have also studied the direct effect of skill mismatch on employment but this study provides a novel perspective of how systemic reform in academic programs can break this negative cycle.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study have shown the interconnected aspects of misaligned curricula, skill mismatch, unemployability and unemployment in Nigeria which are supported by empirical evidence to buttress the theoretical and conceptual frameworks underpinning these relationships. The results suggest that academic curricula misalignment has a substantial effect on predicting skill mismatch, which in turn is positively correlated with unemployment trends. In addition, unemployability plays the mediating role in a spiral effect: the incomplete education, is reflected in the defective curricula that prevent the students from becoming employable, augmenting the unemployment crisis. As described by the descriptive statistics, there was a consensus among the stakeholders that the current academic programs did not provide the practical, technical, or soft skills training that the agencies needed, and did not sufficiently engage the industry. The later factor analysis validated the reliability and robustness of the constructs, corroborating the high correlations of the variables. These results beg for systemic reforms aimed at addressing the root causes of graduate unemployability and unemployment while matching academic products to labour market demands to increase the economic contributions of Nigeria's youth population.

Based on the findings, there are key recommendations. First, there is an urgent need for immediate reforms in the collaboration of educational leaders and industry movers in curricula design. The academic curricula need to be updated to inculcate both practical and technical skills learning, and educational leaders collaborate with industries to stay relevant to industry. Policies shaping such internships, apprenticeships and employer-driven curricula reviews should be there to incentivize academia and industry collaborations. Also, the required set of soft skills training and digital literacy that characterize the modern labour market must become integral parts of university programs. Furthermore, more researchers should focus on longitudinal data to examine short- and long-term effects of the curricula reforms on employment outcomes, and to better understand the homogeneity in outcomes for skill mismatch and unemployment trends between regions. Actionable insights may also be gleaned from a comparative analysis of successful academic-industry partnership models in other developing economies. To address these systemic challenges, policymakers, educators, and employers need to work together to help higher education function as a strong mechanism for providing graduates the skills and competencies they need in order to survive in a competitive labour market.

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